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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [KCUL](#) [AF](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: GOA RELATIONSHIP WITH AFGHAN MEDIA REACHES
CRITICAL JUNCTURE

REF: 06 KABUL 5700

SUMMARY

1. (U) Ongoing war in Afghanistan is taking its toll on media freedom. After initially witnessing dramatic improvements since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's media has experienced a slow yet disturbing turn for the worse over the past year, including increased detention of journalists and government interference in media coverage. The Taliban, for its part, has executed and intimidated journalists. This cable analyzes those trends and their link to the Afghan Mass Media Law, expected to go before Parliament for final approval in the coming days (septel) as a difficult but necessary debate over the role of the media comes to a head. End Summary.

DETERIORATING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

2. (U) Afghanistan's media has made significant progress since the fall of the Taliban. Just six years ago there was only one government newspaper (Sharia) and one radio station Sada-i-Sharia (Voice of Sharia), but today there are over 500 print media outlets, over 50 radio stations and 18 TV stations. But what can be seen as a success has also produced a strong reaction from the GOA, insurgents, and conservatives alike. Journalists and media outlets express fear about increasing trends toward media intimidation, government interference, and self-censorship. In the provinces, where local factional leaders ("warlords") remain powerful, journalists and media outlets report being even more vulnerable to intimidation and reprisals, with some warlords publicly expressing their disapproval of freedom of the press, seeing it as a hindrance to their efforts to maintain old traditions of corruption and intimidation to influence local politics.

¶3. (U) There are three major arguments being used by the GOA to curb media freedom. First, some government officials argue that free media is "un-Islamic" and undermines the cultural norms and moral fabric of the country by broadcasting inappropriate material such as dancing and music or to promote other religions. Second, Minister Khoram has cited another often heard argument that such coverage plays into the hands of the Taliban, who show it in madrassahs in Pakistan for recruiting purposes as evidence of how the Afghan government is in fact "un-Islamic." Third, GOA officials also argue that unregulated media coverage of Taliban attacks, interviews with insurgents and criticism of the GOA undermines the central government - a burden, they maintain, that Afghanistan's fragile political environment cannot bear.

¶4. (U) Journalists and media outlets report significant pressure not to publish negative reports about the government or specific officials. They report that the government has specifically gone after journalists who have had contact with the insurgency or have carried extensive coverage of insurgent attacks (see paras 8, 10).

¶5. (U) Many media organizations point to the current Afghan Minister of Information and Culture as part of the problem. They note that since his appointment by President Karzai, he has brought several negative changes to the Afghan media environment including pushing a conservative and restrictive draft of the Media Law (reftel). Khoram

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recently dismissed nearly 70 young employees within Radio Television Afghanistan resulting in the resignation of the Head of Afghanistan Radio Television. During a February 5 meeting with the DCM, Khoram defended the move by explaining it as an attempt to counter Iranian and Pakistani assault on Afghan culture, and as his Ministry's prerogative in exercising managerial control over RTA. Media contacts also point to Parliamentarians, accusing them of beating journalists and of being unwilling to provide accurate and up-to-date information.

EXAMPLES OF INTERFERENCE AND INTIMIDATION BY THE GOA

¶6. (U) On April 8, the Attorney General's Office reportedly instructed local media outlet Lemar TV to cease transmissions of its Al Jazeera English programming. According to Tolo TV President Saad Mohseni, the Ministry of Information and Culture, which issued the order, failed to provide reasons for this decision.

¶7. (U) In late February 2007, Ariana TV correspondent Fawad Ahmadi was arrested in Herat. NDS officials allegedly deleted footage of a factory workers demonstration from Ahmadi's camera.

¶8. (U) On January 27, 2007 NDS officials detained Tolo TV News Director Sharif Hassanyar because he had conducted telephone interviews with a Taliban spokesperson whose cell phone number was in Hassanyar's own phone. He was not harmed, but NDS officials confiscated his cell phone during that time to monitor received calls. Hassanyar was detained for 29 hours. No charges or legal grounds for his detention were even given.

¶9. (U) The Afghanistan Independent Journalists

Association also reports that one of its journalists, Tawak Miyazi, has recently been jailed for interviewing the new Taliban spokesperson, following the arrest of former spokesman Mohammad Hanif. AIJA is working to have Mr. Miyazi released, maintaining he was arrested for selling his interviews to international outlets such as Reuters and Agence France Presse.

¶10. (U) In March 2006, under direction from President Karzai, NDS officials detained four other senior staff members from Tolo TV. Tolo TV President Saad Mohseni believed the arrests were connected to its broadcast of an interview with Taliban commander Mullah Sanauallah of Helmand, during which Sanauallah had made corruption and war crimes allegations against specific provincial and national government officials, including General Abdul Rashid Dostum and Vice President Khalili.

¶11. (U) In February 2006, radio journalist Abdul Qudus was arrested and detained for 10 months on false allegations that he had attacked Parliamentarian Sarmia Sardad. Qudus was eventually released in January 2007.

¶12. (U) On June 18, 2006, the GOA circulated a document to media outlets imposing restrictions on media content, including: prohibitions on material that would create fear of terrorist organizations interviews with terrorists; reports which will create anxiety among the public; publication of fatwas issued by terrorists; negative stories and reports (no further definition of what constitutes "negative"); coverage which shows the armed forces as weak or

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in a negative light; reports criticizing government policy regarding neighboring states. Later that evening the document was withdrawn by then-Presidential Chief of Staff, Jawed Ludin, but was defended by President Karzai during a subsequent meeting with media.

¶13. (U) By the same token, the government has tried to intimidate media outlets into airing material portraying the government positively. According to Tolo TV, on January 18, 2007 NDS provided footage and asked that Tolo air it. Tolo refused to do so unless they had rights to edit or broadcast the footage only in part. The GOA refused this request. The footage was subsequently aired by Radio-Television Afghanistan, the government-run media outlet.

¶14. (U) According to media sources, NDS has banned all three issues of "The Mashal Weekly," a fairly new publication that is critical of the government. Critics of the paper have accused its Editor-in-Chief, Fazel Rahman, of being "Christian and a supporter of the U.S." Rahman has also received threats and had his car stolen in the past year.

¶15. (U) Journalists also report being pressured by jihadi leaders not to use the word "warlord" in their media coverage. Jihadi leaders claim the term is now inappropriate, as they no longer use force and are part of the political process. Media reports have surfaced in recent weeks that now use the term "strongmen" to refer to jihadi leaders. (Note: Despite the concerns raised by media contacts, it is important to note that there are government leaders, including Parliamentarians, and in some cases Jihadi leaders who have been very supportive of free press in Afghanistan. Some warlords even support and fund media outlets. End note.)

...AND BY THE TALIBAN

¶16. (U) While the GOA accuses the media of facilitating, or cooperating too willingly with, the Taliban, Taliban elements themselves have also been a major source of threats to the media. More disturbing than GOA intimidation of the media are continued physical attacks against journalists.

¶17. (U) On April 8, Taliban executed Afghan journalist Ajmal Naqshbandi who had been abducted last month with the Italian journalist, Daniele Mastrogiacomo (see para 19). In response, Afghan journalists issued a statement on April 9 calling for a week-long boycott of all Taliban news reports. Journalists reported receiving phone calls from Taliban members issuing threats against them for initiating the boycott and saying that journalists who refer to the Taliban as terrorists or insurgents in their coverage risk being captured and killed. On April 10, a protest of over 200 people amassed near Serena Hotel decrying the execution of Naqshbandi and the government's failure to negotiate his release.

¶18. (U) On February 17, 2007, Rahman Qul, editor of Andkhoy Magazine, was attacked and killed by two armed motorcyclists. Qul was a well-known journalist in Faryab Province. Police reported to Pajhwok Afghan News Agency that Taliban elements were responsible for the murder and that they had arrested one suspect.

¶19. (U) According to the AIJA, in January the Taliban issued an open letter that threatened several journalists working throughout eastern Afghanistan and posted it on the AIJA office in Nangarhar. Shortly

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thereafter, there was an explosion in front of the Nangarhar home of one of the journalists mentioned. AIJA also reports two separate attacks against journalists in Laghman province that occurred in January 2007, one by insurgents and the second by local police. (Note: According to AIJA, police claimed the shooting was a case of mistaken identity. End note.)

¶20. (U) On October 9, 2006, two German journalists were killed in Baghlan province. Both international and Afghan journalists have decried the GOA's March 2007 release of imprisoned Taliban officials in exchange for the freedom of Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo, who had been kidnapped by the Taliban. Journalists maintain that the deal reached with the GOA for Mastrogiacomo's freedom now puts them at greater risk of becoming Taliban targets.

PUTTING THE GENIE BACK INTO THE BOTTLE

¶21. (U) In an April 5 meeting with the DCM, Minister Khoram maintained that he is perfectly happy to allow any and all criticism of the Afghan government; the issue, he said, is maintaining cultural norms and how to avoid fueling enemy propaganda, and he asked for U.S. understanding on this score. Post, however, continues to receive contradictory perspectives about GOA tolerance of criticism against it. In an April 5 meeting with POLOFF, Nader Nadery of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) claimed that the AIHRC had received letters from Presidential Chief of Staff Daudzai, Supreme Court Chief Justice Azimi, and Farouk Wardak asking them to stop speaking publicly "against" the GOA.

According to Nadery, these letters intimated that "free speech does not include criticism of the government". Nadery also claimed that in early March he met with President of the Lower House Qanooni to raise concerns about the media law during which Qanooni asked him, "Is a free media really a good thing?"

COMMENT

122. (U) The core issue here is a lack of mutually accepted rules of engagement between the media and the government in the context of an ongoing war whose outcome is by no means pre-determined. The Media Law - set to go before Parliament for final approval in the coming days - will be a key step to institutionalizing those rules of engagement. Free press is a new concept for many in Afghanistan (where the historical pattern has featured violent conservative backlash against too rapid social liberalization). Since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's media has grown faster than Afghan cultural understanding of it can keep up. With the threat posed by the insurgency foremost on its mind, the GOA is equally fearful of the power of an unchecked media. The GOA feels it has few allies in the media, controls only one outlet (RTA), and must resort to clumsy (and futile) efforts to put the free press genie back in the bottle. Critics in the media, for their part, do not appear to acknowledge the fragility of free government in Afghanistan and the fact that if the Taliban takes over again, they will be the first to suffer. This difficult but necessary debate is coming to a head with passage of the Media Law in the coming days (septel).
NORLAND